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It's nice to be in Oxford again; I gave a similar lecture to this one last year; did anyone see that?

Before I go any further I'd better introduce myself. I'm Dr Diane Dubois; I'm Drama programme leader at Lincoln University; I was the external examiner for the MA in scriptwriting at the University of Glamorgan; I also write plays.

I say 'I write plays'. As a rule, I manage to knock out at least one a year, fitting the work around my job at the university.

So what I plan to do for my lecture to you this year is to use last year's lecture as a basis, and add to that 'my year as a playwright'.

So you know a little bit about me and my plans for the next hour or so. Now let me find out a little bit about you: First thing to find out: who here has written a play? Keep your hands up.

Who has had one of their plays produced? Keep your hands up if that's you.

Who among you has had a play professionally produced?

Who has been paid for this?

Who makes enough money from playwriting to live on?

That's your first lesson! This is typical; even writers for theatre as important as David Edgar tend to be attached to universities, or get most of their money through other similar means besides their writing. Writing for TV, radio or film can be more lucrative, though, arguably, that kind of writing will give you less freedom: you have to fit in with the agendas of commissioning editors eager to keep viewing and listening figures, for example. There is, of course, a fair bit of 'hack-work' available writing episodes of soaps and dramas. You can make a living from this sort of writing. But I think it is fair to say that no one writes for theatre because they want to get rich.

Today I'm going to be talking about writing for theatre, as that's what I know most about. I will also talk about the radio play I wrote this year.

Before I go on, I should mention the Writers' Guild; how many are members of this, or any similar organisation (there is an equivalent body for American writers, for example—we know all about them now, thanks to their strike earlier this year)? To join the Guild, you pay an annual fee, plus 10% of any earnings you make from writing. Now, many writers think—hold on a minute!—I already give 10% to their agents, then a hefty chunk goes to the tax man, and so the Guild would take another 10%, so there's half my money gone already; so why should I bother with membership of the Writers' Guild? It's just another organisation that wants a share of my hard-earned money.

However, what the Guild, first and foremost, is a trade union. So the Guild's negotiations with theatres, the BBC and so on, is what empowers your agents to negotiate fees on your behalf (does anyone here have an agent? I don't, but I am a Guild member).

Also, you get regular email bulletins from the Guild, full of opportunities for writers; there is no point writing play after play, if there is nowhere to send it to, and so all those scripts just mount up under your bed. Also, the discipline of writing to a brief and a deadline can be very good for you. As well as full membership of the Guild, student memberships and candidate memberships are available at reduced fees. So think about joining. Google 'Writers' Guild of Great Britain', and visit their website, where you'll find information for writers, as well as contact details and instructions on how to apply for membership.

My own experience as a writer for theatre began when I was working as an actor, while writing my PhD at Hull University. A Hull theatre director asked me, because he knew I was a literature postgrad, if I thought I could write an adaptation of *Julius Caesar*, as that play was on the syllabus in schools and his theatre company wanted to explore working with schools in Hull (Hull has many failing schools, so there would be money available for his theatre company if he branched out into this kind of work—not that I ever saw any of that money!). I mention this to you because you should expect, for your first few plays, to write for free. However, don't let that continue for too long; establish your reputation as a writer, then ask for appropriate fees.

What's an appropriate fee? Hard to say! The Writers' Guild website has guidelines for fees for plays for professional theatre, and these are in turn split up into beginner's rates, and rates for more established writers. So what you get paid will be in accordance with the company you're writing for (so, if you are writing for a professional company, or if it's community theatre, or if it's a semi-professional company—all these things effect the rate of pay) and it will also depend on your experience and track record as a writer. Fees also vary in terms of how long the play is, and whether it's an original play, an adaptation or a devised piece. The Guild website can give you all the details that you need on this, and, if you're a member, the Guild can also give legal help if you think you are being ripped off. So check out their website. The important point to get across to you, however, is this: once you've written a few plays, don't let companies take advantage of you. Never sell yourself short. But, when you are just starting out, be prepared to give them your very best work for little or no money. Also, of course, be prepared to have your scripts returned to you, with a letter saying "thanks, but no thanks."

So I began writing plays through working and generally hanging around theatre companies, including working as an actor. How many of you are actors? Being an actor is useful to a playwright, because that kind of experience will give you an insight into what works on stage. This is invaluable. That intimate knowledge of a script that you only really get when you rehearse and perform it again and again, really shows you the 'guts' of a play. Also, the immediate feedback that you get when you are in front of a live audience and performing will tell you a great deal about an audience's needs

and expectations. Any script should take the needs of the audience into consideration; if you want to write for therapy, or for your own satisfaction, that's great, but don't inflict that on a paying audience!

So do try to do some acting, if you want to write plays for theatre. However, avoid, if at all possible, directing or acting in your own plays; as a writer, you will want to be out front, at rehearsals, so you can watch and listen, and see what in your script is working and what is not. You must be willing to change the script if it is not working, if that's OK with your director. Your director might think that your play is just fine the way it is. Conversely, you must also be willing to cut or otherwise revise a script if the director asks you to; there is nothing more guaranteed to assure that you are never, ever, asked by that director to write for him or her again if you take a precious attitude to every word that you put on paper. I remember directing a play that needed drastic cutting and rewriting, and tearing my hair out in negotiations with the writer, who didn't want to do any sort of rewriting at all. She actually used the phrase "This play is my baby." No it isn't. It's a play. I made sure that I never worked with her again. So always be prepared for rewrites.

I've also learned a great deal from teaching playwriting to my students in Lincoln. I believe that there is no better way to learn about any subject than to try to teach it to someone else.

My first bit of advice I already mentioned a while back: know what works on stage, and write for your audience's needs. This involves basic things, like avoiding a proliferation of characters. Many students write plays with too many characters, both on stage and off. This is a bad idea: for one thing, if you want to get a play produced, never write for more than six characters—remember that every character needs an actor, and every actor needs a salary, and so huge casts will destine your script for the reject pile. Directors like two or three-handers, because they are cheap. The same applies to elaborate sets—does your play really have to be set in a huge, working replica of the Travis fountain? Can it not happen on a park bench? These are things worth thinking about, if you'd ever like to see your play move from page to stage.

The main problem with having too many characters, however, is that this often makes the play's dialogue and story difficult to follow. If you think that you have too many characters, try merging two or more of them together; this can often make for a more interesting, multifaceted character. Imagine if Hamlet had been not one character, but four—one an ousted prince, one a suicidal student, one a detective and one in an unhealthy sort of love with his mother. How much better he is as an amalgamation of all four instead! In a similar vein, my students' characters often talk about characters who are not actually on stage, or who we never see, giving these absent characters names—my mate Phil, Lisa's Auntie Jean, your brother Paul, the neighbour's dog, Fifi—and, of course, the audience immediately forget all these names, and so can't follow the story, and then rapidly lose interest: 'My mate Phil just saw Lisa's auntie Jean talking to your brother Paul about the neighbour's dog Fifi'. Try to find ways of putting whatever it is you are trying to communicate

directly in front of the audience. The cardinal rule of theatre is to show, and not tell.

The same is true for abstractions, like 'fear', or 'hate' or 'love': don't tell; show. Imagine how dull and unmoving Hamlet's famous 'to be or not to be' speech would have been had he instead said something like "I'm so depressed. I've been thinking about killing myself. Trouble is, I don't think I've got enough 'get up and go' to even manage that." Thankfully, Shakespeare didn't tell me how his character was feeling; he showed it to me; even better, through showing it to me, he made me feel what that feeling might be like. So we talk a lot about 'concrete' writing, that is, writing that avoids abstractions like 'fear', or 'hate' or 'love' or 'suicidal depression', and instead makes the abstraction concrete, that is, palpable, and manifest right in front of your audience.

If your character is happy, show them being happy; never tell your audience by having them say, "I'm so happy!" If a character is angry with another character, never have them say, "I'm so angry with you!" Enact that anger; embody it, in a scene, so we can experience what it feels like. Think beyond the obvious, too; if you want to show that one character is angry with another, don't immediately resort to shouting or fist fights—less is often more.

Here's a great example of terrible writing that might better illustrate what I mean. For this I'll need two volunteer actors.

Scene

A park. Two girls sit on a park bench.

Karen: What's the matter? You're upset.

Lisa: So?

Karen: Come on, Lisa, you've been my best friend for nine years. You tell me everything. What's wrong?

Lisa: I'm pregnant.

Karen: Oh my God. Who's the father? It's not Jake, my older brother, is it?

Lisa: Yeah.

Karen: But he's sixteen and you're only thirteen. I can't believe you did this, Lisa. *(she walks off)*

Lisa: I thought you were supposed to be my best friend!

That was an example of terrible 'exposition'. By that I mean that there is nothing wrong with the story, or the characters, but the way in which the story

is told is deeply flawed. All the points in the story are there, and they're fine: Lisa is upset; Karen, her best friend for nine years, and to whom she tells everything, knows that something is not right. It turns out that Lisa is pregnant, and, what is more, she is only thirteen. Worse still, the father turns out to be Jake, Karen's sixteen-year-old brother. Karen is appalled, and deserts Lisa in her hour of need.

So there is nothing wrong with the story, or the characters, yet it is a terrible play. Why? The problem lies in the exposition. When I use this scene in class as the basis for an exercise, I get the students to rewrite the scene, using more skilful exposition. Thus, if the first point of the story to get across to the audience is that Lisa is upset, how can we show this to the audience, instead of having Karen say "What's the matter? You're upset." If Lisa and Karen have been best friends for nine years, and tell each other everything, how can we show this to the audience, instead of having Karen say "Come on, Lisa, you've been my best friend for nine years. You tell me everything." How do we move the story forward, so that Lisa either confesses she is pregnant, or Karen guesses, from what Lisa says or does not say? How do we move the story further forward, so that Lisa either tells Karen that the father is Jake, or Karen guesses, again, from what Lisa says or does not say? And what makes Karen, Lisa's best friend for nine years, suddenly desert her, just when she most needs a friend?

This latter point takes me on to another important issue: that of subplot. One of the great pleasures of watching a play is that the audience gets to figure out what is really going on, underneath the dialogue and gestures. A good writer will make it clear to the audience what is going on below the surface, yet it is never glaringly obvious. Of course, knowing what this is can only come about if you know your characters inside and out. So you must ask yourself, what motivates Karen in this scene? Maybe she was never such a good friend all along, and she is finally showing her true colours? Maybe she enjoys bestowing and then removing her friendship on a whim, because this gives her some sort of twisted power kick? Only the writer can decide.

Having said that, if your characters that you have created are any good, they will make those kinds of decisions for you. D.H. Lawrence said that you should never try to nail anything down in your writing; if you try to do so, a well-written character will simply get up and walk away with the nail. What he means by that is that you cannot force your character to do something that she or he would not do. Above all, never be didactic. By all means write about pressing social issues such as domestic violence, gender politics or drug abuse, but remember that you are a playwright, and not a politician on a soapbox. Your concerns should be theatrical, and not 'issue-led'.

If you let your character develop freely, and listen to and watch your character carefully, she or he will reveal their motivations to you. This is what we mean when we say that a play is 'character-led': the characters tell the writer what must happen. This is the way to achieve 'dramatic truth': the search for this kind of truth can only begin by avoiding stereotypes, and being faithful to the full complexity of your characters. If you're stuck on how to progress your

story, take a lesson from Raymond Chandler, who said that whenever he didn't know what was going to happen next in one of his detective novels, he would have someone walk into the room holding a gun. Then he'd deal with that new situation.

So start your play with characters, and go from there. Don't impose the plot on the characters; let your characters do what they will do and say what they will say. A good writer writes from 'scenes in the head'—the writer sees and hears the characters, almost as if they are on a stage inside the writer's head. The writer then writes the play by observing carefully and writing down what the characters say and do on that imaginary stage.

If you take this approach, you will notice that the plot is not unnecessarily detailed or convoluted or otherwise sensational; the thorough understanding of the characters is foremost. Put it another way: You don't have to have a character walk into a room with a gun, as Chandler would have it; your character can walk into a room holding a book. Or simply walk into the room. Look at Harold Pinter's play, *The Caretaker*, for a master class in putting two characters together, then introducing a third one, then taking one of the original two out, and endlessly shuffling them like this, in the end producing a gripping play about nothing more than three people sharing a room.

So you don't need gun-toting gangsters or other similar, sensational twists in the plot to write a great play. There are no car chase scenes in *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett's characters are explored in real depth and detail; they are well-rounded, and their inner lives explored fully. Their situation is a very simple one: they are waiting. Yet it is a gripping play, full of action.

What do I mean by action? Anyone who has studied Stanislavski will know. It is best illustrated in his famous exercise in *An Actor Prepares*, where the drama teacher gets one after another of his students to go up and simply sit on the stage. Let me read it to you:

(read excerpt from *An Actor Prepares*)

So the most important kind of 'action' on the stage concerns the inner life of the character. Never feel that sensational things must be constantly happening, in order to keep your audience 'entertained'. Never feel that ingenious twists of plot are necessary to the creation of a compelling piece of theatre.

Handle your exposition, pacing, and build-up of tension with a lightness of touch; make sure that every word, including stage directions and set description, subtly enhances our understanding of the characters and their situation; the play may make use of striking imagery, or innovative techniques, but above all it must be controlled, concrete and clear.

Other factors to consider when you write a play are things like structure and chronology. Films tell their stories in short scenes that flit about all over the place, through time and through space. Plays tend not to do that. Think about

the wisdom of Aristotle, and his three unities of time, space and action. You can write a wonderful play that is set in one room, over the space of one hour, that involves something as simple as two characters passing the time. Make sure that, if you are writing a play for the theatre, your play resembles a script for contemporary theatre, and not for radio, television or film.

This seems like a good place to talk about my radio drama.

In late 2006 I was commissioned by BBC Radio Humberside, which is based in the BBC regional centre in Hull, which is where I was living at the time. Hull is the birthplace of William Wilberforce, the spokesperson for the movement that sought the abolition of slavery, so there were numerous activities across the city throughout 2007 to commemorate the anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade, and the local BBC naturally wanted to be part of that. I'm a playwright, and I was, at the time, living in Hull, so they approached me to write the script.

When I gave this lecture last year, one of the students asked me for advice on how to handle historical characters in a script. Had she been here this year, I might be better equipped to answer her. Certainly, the fact that I was writing about 'real people' and events that actually happened presented challenges to me. Possibly the biggest of these was that Wilberforce and his associated abolitionist colleagues were in favour of universal humanity, but not universal equality. They were alarmed by the revolutions in France and the US, worried about things they regarded as treasonous, and opposed to things like the emancipation of women and the eradication of barriers associated with class and inequalities that had their roots in colonialism. Now, their views do not coincide with my own. My heroes of the period are the much more radical thinkers William Blake, Mary Wolstonecraft and Thomas Paine. So how can I represent the abolitionists truthfully, without appearing to castigate them for not holding the same political ideas as me? My solution was to first meet the abolitionists in a dinner party scene where the works of Blake, Wolstonecraft and Paine were among the topics under discussion. The views voiced by the abolitionists in this scene are not my own views. Thus I avoided imposing my own views on the characters, and also avoided misrepresenting the characters, leaving the audience to decide for themselves what they thought of the opinions and actions of Wilberforce and company.

I didn't want to patronise my audience members, as I think that the invented demographic of 'viewers and listeners that are none too bright' is a creation of nervous management with an eye on the ratings. Allow me a quick rant on this subject, if you would: Whenever I hear people wondering at the success of so-called 'reality television' I can only suggest that the phenomenon is so popular because so much scripted drama that gets broadcast is so bad! I think that there is so much pressure from the 'suits' to retain viewers and listeners that drama is as a result quite toothless. There is this terror that output might offend the audience, even though the old racist and sexist stereotypes seem to be enjoying a bit of a comeback. The real source of potential 'offence' seems to come from the 'threat' of making an audience engage the brain and think. It seems as if the prevailing belief is

that, if a programme is in any way thoughtful, viewers might turn over in search of something dumb (and newscasts never get experts in any more-- they always ask 'ordinary people' their opinion, instead of getting in a bit of potentially enlightening expertise--grr!). A friend of mine (who shall remain nameless) who recently did a BBC4 programme based on one of her books was told that she could not refer to Freud, as this might go over viewers' heads--and this was on BBC4, for god's sake!

So, in my efforts to not patronise my audience members, I tried to write a polysemous script, that is, one that can be enjoyed on a variety of levels. I think the play was easy enough to follow, and it has a good story to tell, but it also had depths and resonances that allowed for a deeper reading, for those inclined to look for it. For example, I felt that this play should be as much about today (when it was written) as it was about the C18th (when it was set), so I filled it with little phrases that evoke contemporary fair trade issues, the connection between global power and the chief commodity of global trade, be it sugar in the C18th or oil in the C21st, and so on (I also think there is a parallel between the abolitionists' Wedgwood pin and the fashionable charity wristbands pioneered by Lance Armstrong, which I tried to suggest in the script). I hoped that small details like these might resonate a little bit with listeners inclined to pick up on such things, though, of course, the play could be enjoyed perfectly well without having to note these details.

In a similar vein, I had to make sure that the language was not too archaic, but also not too colloquial. So, for example, instead of using phrases like 'nominal Christians' I opted for the more contemporary, though still not too jarring 'so-called Christians'. I think that, due to the proliferation of period adaptations, on TV, film and radio, a good part of my audience was 'fluent', as it were, in the kind of dialogue that I was giving them (which is, of course, a constructed idea of how this class of people conversed in 'days of yore', based on the kind of rendering one finds in recent film and TV period dramas). Familiarise yourself with the conventions of the media—but don't be afraid to stretch these to breaking point either!

All media have their strengths and weaknesses. I don't think that historically based drama works better or worse on radio in comparison to film and/or television, or, indeed, in theatre. However, it is important to try to exploit the strengths of whatever particular medium for which you are writing. The language systems used by film, TV and radio to tell their stories are all very different from one another. If you are trying to write for radio, the best way to learn the 'language' of radio drama is to expose yourself to a lot of radio dram—to listen to it (incidentally, radio drama is still an excellent place for newer writers to start earning money. Check out the BBC writersroom website for up and coming opportunities, and advice on sending in unsolicited scripts). It is also essential that you study the correct industry standard script layout for your chosen medium. There are different techniques for film, radio and TV; again, the BBC writersroom website is a good place to look, and they also offer free, downloadable script writing software.

As well as paying attention to the 'language' of your chosen medium, you must pay attention to the terms of your commission, if you have one. 'Doing your own thing' or 'interpreting the brief' is a sure-fire way of not getting paid. One aspect of my commission was that the play should go out in five 10-minute instalments, and also as one complete play, so I had to make sure that it broke down into five portions of equal length, but could also run as a stand-alone one hour drama--tricky, but not impossible, as, after working as a writer for many years, I know how to edit to length. Working with my producer, we also managed to edit to length, varying things like credits, music and so on, so that what we made fit the allocated slot. Again, whining about changes to the script will not make you well liked; you and your producer are on the same team, trying to solve the same problem, so make sure you work together!

Now, another part of my commission was to base this specific radio play around the idea of the 'diary', and so the anchor for the smaller scenes, and the 'push' behind the narrative's progression was the 'voice' of an older Wilberforce, trying to write his life's story. This lends itself very well to radio drama, if you use close mic voiceover to represent Wilberforce's thoughts. This centrality of the Wilberforce character presented political problems to me, as it is not, of course, just Wilberforce's story, but the story of the slaves (whose voices were effectively silenced), as well as that of the other abolitionists, and the people of England and, indeed, beyond these shores. This notion of polyphonic 'voices' lends itself very well to radio drama. However, the focus set by the commission had to be Wilberforce himself, and so I had to make him central (again, I had political reservations about this, so how could I fulfil my brief without 'selling out' my beliefs?). Thus, at the play's opening, I had 'old Wilberforce' acknowledge that this was not simply 'his' story. Similarly, the play concludes with him asking questions about 'history', or 'his-story', if you will, and how subsequent generations might rewrite it. He pointedly allows Equiano to tell his version of events. I called the play *Chronicles of Freedom*, and the very notion of 'chronicles' foregrounds the idea of written and recorded 'versions' of history (I hope!), as does the recurring sound of Old Wilberforce's quill pen scratching on paper as he writes his diaries. Again, the medium of radio allows for this specific use of sound effect. Thus, just as Wilberforce was the person who brought a diverse range of people together to effect abolition, he is, in my play, the voice that draws together the polyphony of voices.

It was not all smooth sailing getting this play made—far from it!

The BBC's new bi-media policy—that is, that news staff and broadcast journalists were co-opted into things like producing radio dramas—impacted on my work. I can only comment on my experience, and not the entire output of radio drama, of course, but here is what happened to me:

I was commissioned by a senior broadcast journalist; I didn't know he was a broadcast journalist at the time, as I only knew him from theatre, until he moved into the BBC. At the beginning of the project he told me that the money was there to buy in a 'big name' actor to voice Wilberforce. The 'name' voice he had in mind at the time was John Hurt, who, being from Lincolnshire, was

close to being local (although Tom Courtenay, as a 'Hull boy', would have seemed a more logical choice, but anyway . . .).

Thus I came up with the idea of making his voice the anchor for the various scenes and monologues that make up the rest of the play, as, for the aforementioned political reasons, I felt that we could not just represent the lone voice of Wilberforce, even if he was played by John Hurt. So I ran this past the guy who commissioned me, and this was fine by him.

I knew that we were due to broadcast in March 2007, and was concerned when Christmas 2006 came around, and no one had asked me for a draft script, or given me a deadline. I had a first draft of my script ready by then. Thus, I reapproached the guy who commissioned me, who said to get the finished script in by early March. As is my practice, I got it in a week before the deadline he eventually set me, only to be told that they could now no longer afford to cast Hurt. At one point they threatened to bring in a group of am-dram actors, which I swiftly vetoed, and offered them instead the use of my students at Lincoln University.

By now, March had gone whooshing past, and so I suggested we record with a view to broadcast in October, for Black History Month. I waited to hear from the guy who commissioned me, having cast and read through with my students. It was at the point when he said that he would come in to record, in a single take, on one day, with an outside broadcast team, that I began to suspect that he had no idea how radio dramas were made, so I enlisted the help of two of my colleagues at the university, Andy Jordan and Bryan Rudd, both of whom have extensive experience of radio drama. In the end we recorded the play ourselves, in university studios and on location in Lincoln (for that authentic sound of C18th rooms, of which Lincoln has an abundance). This, of course, fell outside of my commission, as I ended up directing, and Bryan producing and editing. Neither of us received any fees for this, but at least we got the thing made. We delivered it on Christmas Eve 2007, as my producer said he now wanted to broadcast between Christmas and New Year. As the play featured an Advent hymn in its opening scene, I felt this would suit, but our producer had failed to secure a broadcast slot, and so the thing finally went out in January.

I feel that, in this instance, the BBC bi-media policy meant that someone was given a job to do that he had no training or previous experience to help him execute successfully. It was only because of my determination to have this play see the light of day (and to get the other half of my commission, of course, on broadcast!), together with the wonderful (not to mention free of charge) help from students and colleagues that this play was ever transmitted. It was ever thus, and often starts people off on the road to becoming producers, so do not, at the first sign of trouble, take your bat and ball home. Persevere, solve the problems as they come up, and learn from everything that you do.

Other practical tips for writers:

Listen to, watch and see plays! Most writers of plays start out as avid play readers and theatre-goers. Arthur Miller famously sat and laboriously copied out passages of Shakespeare by hand, so that he could learn from the master by getting up close to the words that Shakespeare wrote. Like acting, it is a way of getting to the guts of a play, and really seeing how it works on the page. Read plays, scripts and screenplays, too. Compare these to what you hear on the radio, see on screen, or on stage. A script is a blueprint for a performance, written to enable a dramatic event to take place, on screen, stage or radio. If the makers of your dramatic event are to understand your 'blueprint', you must learn how to communicate your ideas via this blueprint in the correct, industry-standard format that your drama makers will recognise and be able to understand. So learning how to represent your ideas on paper is absolutely essential.

Because a script is a blueprint for a performance, written to enable a dramatic event to take place, a script is not a finished product, like a poem or a novel. That is, it is not a thing that is written to be read. It is written to be performed. I therefore urge you all to take the opportunity, whenever it presents itself, to have your words taken from the page and on to the stage, at writers' groups, through rehearsed readings, or staging by good quality amateur theatre companies. Experience the ways in which your written word might be translated into speech and movement, and learn from this. If you want to write for radio, TV or film, approach film and TV and film schools, drama schools, film festivals, community radio stations. Remember, many of these are likely to be low budget endeavours, so resist the urge to submit your version of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

If you are interested in writing for the stage, the Edinburgh Festival Fringe is an excellent place to see terrific theatre. It is also an excellent place to see terrible theatre. Either way, as playwrights, you can learn from this. Why not form a theatre company and take your play up there? Expect to lose money, and not make any, and you will have a ball. It's great experience, and also an excellent showcase for your talents, as writers, actors, producers.

Form a writers' group. One advantage of being a member of a writers' group is that the discipline of having to write for a weekly meeting can be very motivating. Also, other writers can be massively supportive. Having said that, the reverse can also be true. One particular writer had it in for me, and constantly tried to undermine me every time we met. One day, over a beer or seven, I was amazed to get a full apology from her. She confessed that she had been jealous of me all along, and that she saw me as competition. My response was to say to her, "Well, that was very brave of you to admit that, but I must say that I never, ever saw you as competition." So be prepared for a degree of bitchiness that can be quite breathtaking.

A writers' group is a terrific place to test out work in progress, but, when presenting a finished piece of work to an outside body, make sure that you proofread, polish, draft and redraft until the play is fit to be seen. Take the time to consider mechanical considerations, such as spelling and punctuation; grammar and syntax; it is vital that your reader knows that any quirk of

spelling or grammar belongs to your character, and not to you! You don't want to come across on paper as a semi-literate fool. This is especially true if you are in the habit of sending off unsolicited scripts to theatres. If you have used an incorrect or off-the-wall script format, or if your script is littered with typographical or other errors, you may well be providing it with a shortcut to the reject pile.

Of course, even with great characters, skilful exposition and a simple plot, a play will still not work if the dialogue is poor. Dialogue must be sensitively written, full of nuances and carefully rendered cadence; the language must possess sufficient personal quirks to make the characters seem very real. How can you go about achieving this? One way is to make sure that you keep a notebook with you at all times, because you never know when you might overhear something that would make an excellent piece of dialogue. Record any brilliant ideas that might pop into your head while on the bus or in the bath. Whatever it is, get it down on paper, and don't lose it! Use your notebook unselfconsciously. No one need ever see what you put down in it, unless you want them to.

Always reflect on your writing, and keep asking questions about the play that you are working on. It may seem sensible to follow the old adage and 'write about what you know', but you will produce a much more compelling script if you write about what you *want* to know. That can be as simple, and as profound, as wanting to know what makes your characters tick.

You might want to keep a separate journal, or logbook alongside your notebook. Use it to reflect on your writing activities from day one, and to make a note of your observations. This is useful to your work as a writer, as it feeds back directly into your creative activities.

By all means read books on scriptwriting, and academic or theoretical texts about writing and about writers. There are lots of really useful books out there that will help you to think more deeply about your writing, and the writing of others. If you do this, make sure that most of your research is done on the writing of plays, and not on the subject matter of the play that you are writing. Remember: you are a playwright, and not an historian or a social scientist.

Above all, to be a writer, it is very important that you write. A lot of writers forget that! It is easily done, as we love to talk about writing, over the aforementioned beers, and that often seems preferable to the isolation and the hard graft of actually putting pen to paper, or finger to keyboard. So make sure that you write all the time, and try to write a little every day if possible. Some days will be massively productive, and ideas will flow thick and fast, and other days it will feel like pulling teeth. Those days will require more sustained effort, possibly with little or nothing to show for it at the end. Persevere. Some writers repeatedly abandon work in progress, exactly when sustained effort is what is needed. When the going gets tough, keep going; do not give into the temptation to throw a script away and start from scratch. Try to figure out what is wrong with the script, and then, if possible, put it right.

You'll discover lots of new ideas as you get down to the actual writing. Do not waste time trying to avoid the dreaded blank piece of paper. Writing is a job, like any other, and involves more perspiration than inspiration, so avoid procrastination. One of the best pieces of advice I ever got was this: "Do not sit around all day waiting for the white dove of inspiration to come along and crap on your head. There is no such bird."

A final piece of advise, which I got from Hilary Strong, who was in charge of the Edinburgh Fringe, in 1998, was this: "It's a long game." So don't get frustrated, keep learning, keep improving, and never give up. Above all, keep playing that game, and make sure that you enjoy every minute.

I'm probably best known for a play I wrote in 1998 called *Myra and Me*. I rewrote that play throughout the rehearsals, and in the end, I had four versions of the play. One we used to premiere it before we took it up to the Edinburgh Fringe (you all know about the Fringe? More on the Fringe later). That was a good 'test drive' in front of an audience, and that helped me to produce another, better, tighter version, for the Fringe itself. The last version was for Hull Truck theatre, where it was produced after we returned from the Fringe. The other, penultimate cut was one of those eleventh hour rewrites that I mentioned a moment ago. Let me explain how that came about.

The 'Myra' in the play's title referred to Myra Hindley (do you know who she was?). As a result of this, the play was the subject to a lot of controversy in the media, largely from people who knew nothing about the play, hadn't seen it, hadn't read it; didn't even know what it was about. The result was that we were asked to leave the Gilded Balloon (our venue in Edinburgh) after our opening performance. The argument was that the Gilded Balloon, best known as a comedy venue, favoured the lighter side of the Fringe, and so my play was deemed unsuitable. This was clearly a lie: my play was a comedy, and that venue was also hosting *Krapp's Last Tape* (a play that has a few jokes in it, but you'd hardly describe it as a laugh a minute). The real reason behind our move was this: a big brewery sponsor, who will remain nameless, was financially backing the Gilded Balloon's chain of venues that year, and threatened to remove that financial support if my 'controversial' play was not closed down. The venue manager, Karen Koren, played an absolute blinder of a negotiation, in that she managed to get us moved from the Gilded Balloon (unofficially accepted as the second or third best venue at the Fringe) to the Assembly Rooms (probably the best venue at the Fringe). This was going to happen on the grounds that I didn't speak to the press before I gave the exclusive story to the Observer newspaper—who were financial backers of the Assembly Rooms that year. It's worth noting, then, the massive and complicated vested interests that happen behind the scenes. Never sacrifice your artistic integrity, but always be flexible, and try to see the bigger picture at all times. It's a scary fact that financial backers will try to dictate artistic policy if they think their investment might be at risk. So you have to walk a very wobbly tightrope between sticking to your guns, artistically, and making sure that the play goes on; 'the play's the thing', as they say, and an unperformed play is no play at all.

So we were on the move to the best and most important venue at the Fringe. Good news. Excellent news, really, and a very good outcome from what could have been a disaster. Only the slot available at the Assembly Rooms was twenty minutes shorter than the one we had had at the Gilded Balloon. So we had to open our show at the Gilded Balloon, then reload our set into the van, drive it across town, unload, and then prepare for a tech and dress at our new venue that was to take place at 2.30 that morning. That left me four hours to cut twenty minutes from the script. No sleep, no food, no beer—all very harsh. What was more, it was a convoluted play, made of many short interwoven scenes, so I could not just chop out great big sections; I had to unpick it,

thread by thread, and put it back together again, only twenty minutes shorter. I worked on the principle of a minute a page (you know that guesstimate?), so when the little page counter at the corner of my laptop said I was twenty pages shorter, I knew I was about right. I used a printer in the press office at the venue to print out a script for the technicians, and as they replotted the lighting board and edited the sound effects on minidisk, I went through the cuts with the cast, who were wonderful, knew the play inside out, and so found the cuts easy to adjust to. Phew! So we were ready to open at the Assembly Rooms the next day. Imagine how counterproductive it would have been if I'd had a big hissy-fit about 'my baby'. We would not have had a show, and we might as well have packed up and gone home.

The play did well; I was nominated for a Fringe First, and got a Herald Angel award, and the reviews were good. The broadsheets, needless to say, liked the play better than the tabloids. I did more press, radio and TV interviews that year than anything I've been involved with before or since, and, as they say, no publicity is bad publicity. But a word of warning: never trust a tabloid journalist. You might think, looking at a tabloid, that the writers are none too clever or sophisticated, but that is simply not the case. They are highly educated, very shrewd, and know how to produce exactly the kind of copy their readers want to read. So when a reporter from the *Daily Record* rang me for an interview, and when he seemed to be really on my wavelength, I really thought my luck was in. So I opened up to him, told him exactly what the play was about, and why I wrote it, and, in doing so, mentioned how the media coverage of Hindley helped turn her into an icon of absolute evil, just as the media portrayal of Princess Diana turned her into an icon of absolute goodness. Imagine me, then, turning up in Edinburgh, going up to our venue's press office, pulling out our bulging file of pre-publicity press cuttings, and finding a full-page article from the *Daily Record* with a picture of me, superimposed with an image of Hindley's face, and a huge headline underneath saying 'Outrage as Playwright Compares Hindley to Diana'.

So mind how you go when dealing with the media; they are not there to help you, and they are not your friends! They have their own agendas, and they probably don't coincide with yours. *The Sun*, another redtop tabloid, called me "twisted and sick," which I reckon certifies my sanity and righthheadedness, but it's still a shock to see yourself referred to in print that way.

Still, newspapers are, as they say, 'tomorrow's fish and chip papers', and after the run, the media found someone else to plague, I'm sure. All in all, that Edinburgh festival was a great experience, with a very steep learning curve, and it didn't earn me a penny, but I wouldn't have missed out on it for the world, because of all that I learned in the space of just under two months. I went on to write more plays for theatre, and have just finished my first play for radio, and I plan to keep writing as long as the urge to write is there.